

NOT A DRY EYE

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Some years ago, when I was visiting Greece, I was invited to serve at a parish in the center of Athens. It was autumn, so the heat had abated somewhat and it was a beautiful, clear Sunday morning — rare for Athens nowadays.

We arrived at the church, which was already packed. The Service of Matins began and in due time we began the Divine Liturgy. Soon, after the Gospel had been read, it was time for the sermon, and, of course, since I was the guest of honor, the task of giving the homily fell on me.

What could I, an American of Greek descent, born in California, possibly tell these people? These were the survivors of a devastating World War, which had wiped out one-tenth of the country's population. This catastrophe had been followed by a bloody civil war that lasted four more years, *after* the World War, which had lasted almost six years. Among the survivors in the congregation stood many who had been driven from their homes in Asia Minor only a few decades before, and had endured ruthless massacres at the hands of Attaturk's Moslem armies. Furthermore, they were survivors of yet more persecutions from their own new calendar compatriots. They had lost their clergy, relatives, friends, church buildings, monasteries and convents repeatedly. Innocent people imprisoned, beaten, killed. Churches bull-dozed or confiscated in "democratic" Greece.

In contrast, I had been born and reared in sunny California: easy-going, laid-back, untroubled, zany, ostentatious, pleasure-loving California, the land of convertibles and sunglasses.

It was as though we came from two different planets.

But both the Athenians and I were Orthodox Christians, and so this is what I thought might touch their hearts.

I told them that I was very grieved when I became a bishop. I was grieved because, not only was I unworthy of the priesthood, but I was also unsuited for the task. I knew something about translations and liturgical music. I did some gardening work at the monastery. But I knew nothing about church administration, or pastoral issues, or liturgical questions.

But what grieved me the most — I told the congregation — was that I would miss the readings at our monastery's vigils and meals. There were sermons by the Church Fathers that are rarely, or perhaps even *never*, heard by our laity in the parishes.

For example, who can describe Saint John Chrysostom's thrilling sermon for the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul? Or the compunctionate and tear-jerking account by James the Deacon about Saint Nonnus the bishop and his first encounter with Pelagia, the beautiful prostitute, in fourth-century Antioch? Or the hilarious sixth-century "Catechism" by the Archdeacon Samuel, in the country of Georgia? Or the mischievous and God-inspired pranks of Feophil, the Fool for Christ in Kiev?

So, for the benefit of the people in Athens — these descendants of the people who had heard Saint Paul speak at Mars Hill near the Parthenon — I told them that I would read them a portion of a homily by Saint Ephraim the Syrian, just to give them an idea of what I was talking about. This way, they would understand what they had been missing

all these years, and why I was so grieved when I was pulled out of the monastery to become a bishop.

I read a portion of Saint Ephraim's sermon for the feast of the Holy Transfiguration. As I have said elsewhere, after the Sermon on the Mount, this is probably the best sermon ever given anywhere.

When I finished reading Saint Ephraim's words, there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

The tearful Syrian had touched the hearts of these war-weary Athenians.

This is the portion of Saint Ephraim's sermon that I read to the people:

On the Holy Transfiguration

By Saint Ephraim the Syrian (+363)

The events of Christ's life, and His own divine powers, teach those who can learn that He is true God, and His sufferings openly proclaim Him true man.

For if He were not flesh, for what reason did Mary bring Him forth? And if He was not God, who then did Gabriel call Lord?

If He was not flesh, who then lay in the manger? If He was not God, to whom did the angels coming to earth give glory?

If He was not man, who was wrapped in swaddling clothes? If He was not God, whom then did the Shepherds adore?

If He was not man, whom did Joseph circumcise? And if He was not God, in whose honour did a new star appear in the heavens?

If He was not man, whom did Mary nourish at the breast? And if He were not God, to whom did the Magi offer gifts?

If He was not man, whom did Symeon take in His arms? And if He was not God, to whom did Symeon say: Dismiss me in peace?

If He was not man, whom did Joseph take and flee with him into Egypt? And if He was not God, in whom was the prophecy fulfilled: Out of Egypt have I called my son? (Mt. ii. 15; Num. xxiv. 2-9).

If He was not man, whom did John baptize? And if He was not God, of whom did the Father from Heaven say: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased? (Mt. iii. 17).

If He was not man, who fasted and hungered in the desert? And if He was not God, to whom did the angels minister?

If He was not man, who was invited to the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee? And if He was not God, who changed the water into wine?

If He was not man, in whose hands were the loaves of bread placed? And if He were not God, who fed and filled from five barley loaves and two fishes the multitude in the desert, five thousand men, not counting the women and children?

If He was not a man, who slept in the boat? And if He were not God, who was it that rebuked the winds and the sea, and calmed them?

If He was not man, who was it that ate with Simon the Pharisee? And if He were not God, who forgave the woman her sins?

If He was not a man, who sat by the well weary from the journey? And if He was not God, who gave the Samaritan woman the water of life; and who rebuked her, she that already had five husbands?

If He was not of our flesh, who wore the garments of a man? And if He were not God, who then was it that wrought signs and wonders?

If He was not a man, who spat upon the earth, and made mud from the clay? And if He were not God, who caused eyes to see that were made from clay? (Jn. ix).

If He was not man, who wept at the tomb of Lazarus? And if He were not God, who by his command alone called forth him that was four days dead?

If He was not a man, who was it that sat upon an ass's colt? And if He were not God, before whom did the crowd march to give Him glory?

If He was not a man, whom did the Jews make prisoner? And if He were not God, who commanded the earth, and it threw them flat to the ground?

If He was not a man, who was beaten with blows? And if He were not God, who healed the ear which Peter had cut off, and who restored it to its place?

If He was not a man, whose face was spat upon? And if He were not God, who breathed the Holy Spirit upon the faces of the Apostles? (Jn. xx. 22).

If He was not a man, who was it stood before Pilate at the judgment seat? And if He were not God, who caused the wife of Pilate to suffer many things in a dream?

If He was not a man, upon whose garments did the soldiers cast lots, dividing them amongst them? And if He were not God, for what reason did the sun grow dark above the Cross?

If He was not a man, who was it that hung upon a cross? And if He were not God, who moved the earth upon its foundations?

If He was not a man, whose hands were pierced by the nails? And if He were not God, how was the veil of the temple rent in twain, and the rocks split asunder, and the graves opened?

If He was not a man, who cried out: My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me? And if He were not God, who said: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?

If He was not man, who hung with thieves upon a cross? And if He were not God, for what cause did He say: This day thou shalt be with me in paradise?

If He was not a man, whose side was opened by a lance, and there came out blood and water? (Jn. xix. 34). And if He were not God, who hath shattered the gates of Sheol and brake the bars of iron? (Ps. cvi. 16). And by whose command did the dead that slept in their graves come forth?

If He was not a man, whom did the Apostles behold in the Upper Room? And if He was not God, in what manner did He enter, the doors being closed!

If He was not a man, in whose hand did Thomas feel the wounds of the nails and the lance? And if He was not God, to whom did Thomas cry out saying: My Lord and My God?

If He was not a man, who ate food by the sea of Tiberias? And if He were not God, at whose command was the net filled with fishes?

If He was not man, whom did the Apostles and the Angels see received into the Heavens? If He was not God, to whom were the Heavens opened, whom did the powers adore in fear and trembling, and to whom had the Father said: Sit thou at my right hand?

This is the reason the chaste John, who leaned upon that burning Breast, confirming the voices of the prophets, and discoursing of the divinity, teaches us in His Gospel, saying: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him: and without Him was made nothing that was made. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; Who is God the Word from God, and the Only-begotten Son of the Father, Who is consubstantial with the Father, Who is, from Him Who is: the Word before all ages: ineffably and before all ages begotten of the Father without a mother; the Same in these last days is born without a father. God Incarnate, from a daughter of men, from the Virgin Mary; taking flesh from Her, and from Her made man, which He was not, remaining God, which He was, that He might redeem the world. Amen.*

**The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers Volume two pp. 49-51.*

Translated and edited by M.F. Toal, D.D., Copyright © 1996

Preservation Press, Inc Swedesboro, NJ 08085